

On the Role and Capabilities of Strategy Directors:

Supporting Upper Echelons in Complex Organizational Settings

Dr Sotirios Paroutis
Assistant Professor of Strategic Management
Warwick Business School
United Kingdom
+44 (0) 2476 575340
Sotirios.Paroutis@wbs.ac.uk

Dr Duncan Angwin
Associate Professor of Strategic Management
Warwick Business School
United Kingdom
+44 (0) 2476 524541
Duncan.Angwin@wbs.ac.uk

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ABSTRACT

Today, strategy appears to be everyone's domain with directors of Strategic Marketing, Strategic IT, Strategic HR, Strategic Operations. With 'Strategy' increasingly perceived as ripe territory for all senior directors this article asks 'what then is the role of the senior Strategy Director' – a board level executive specifically tasked with strategy? In particular, what do Strategy Directors do and what capabilities do they employ to enable effective contribution to the firm? This question of the role and activities of these strategists, of strategy as something that people do, is central to the research agenda of the Strategy-as-Practice perspective which observes that our understanding on who strategists are and how they support upper echelons remains limited (Whittington, 2003). Strategy Directors do not work in isolation and a key aspect of understanding their role and capabilities is about understanding their interaction with a set of strategy practitioners which may include strategy teams as well as senior executives involved in strategy episodes. Using multiple interviews over time, this paper identifies the role, activities and capabilities of Strategy Directors in the context of other strategic stakeholders in UK companies. Our findings show some commonalities with earlier US research on Chief Strategy Officers, as both perform a vital role in shaping and executing a firm's strategy, a role which could not be filled by other functional heads. However UK Strategy Directors in this study are distinctive in the ways in which they perform their role and use their capabilities; in the ways they interact with other strategic stakeholders. The implications are that Strategy Directors in the UK hold a unique and demanding position which to date has been largely unsung. The peculiarities and stresses of the position demands acute socio-political capabilities as well as robust intellectual and technical skills. The profession of Strategy Director is not an easy one and outstanding individuals capable of fulfilling the role successfully are decidedly rare.

Keywords: Multi-business firm; practice; process; strategizing; strategy directors; strategy teams

INTRODUCTION

Despite the very large quantities of writing on strategy, its nature and content, the established strategy literature assumes the way strategy is made and executed is primarily associated with the CEO as chief strategist and the board of directors (Finkelstein and Hambrick, 1996; Pettigrew, 1992). However it is increasingly the case that strategy is perceived as legitimate territory for a much broader constituency. Senior functional executives often have titles such as head of strategic marketing, director of strategic IT, global strategic operations director, head of global strategic HR and within functions and business units many executives now have strategy titles. With this proliferation of ‘strategists’ it is timely to enquire about those senior executives specifically tasked with being ‘Strategy Directors’ - defined as senior board level (non CEO) executives whose very job is about the strategy of the firm. It seems we have little idea about their role and purpose - a particularly pertinent issue if everyone else is now a strategist. What distinctive role does the Strategy Director perform and what specific capabilities do they bring to the organization? With the spread of strategy to other functional areas, is there a need for Strategy Directors? Are they now obsolete or do they carry out a critical and largely unsung function? This article aims to provide answers for these questions and thus demonstrate the academic and practical relevance of this kind of research.

Alongside the proliferation of strategists inside larger companies, in academia we are witnessing increased attention on the particular roles and actions of those involved in the strategy process though studies focusing on ‘strategy as practice’ (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Jarzabkowski et al. 2007; Johnson et al. 2003; Whittington, 2007). While empirical studies in this area (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2003; Salvato, 2003) provide us with rich accounts of the ways managers act while formulating and implementing strategy, we are still missing an in-depth examination of the activities undertaken by Strategy Directors. At the same time, studies have suggested that the rapid pace of change in modern organizations means that the roles of those involved in strategy are changing and so are the skills required for strategizing and organizing work. However, our understanding about the skills required by strategists remains scarce (Whittington, 2003). This study addresses these gaps by focusing upon the roles and capabilities of Strategy Directors during the strategy process in large firms. The paper is divided into three parts. The first outlines the theoretical background and method of our study; in the second, our empirical findings are reported. Finally, the third part presents our conclusions and a set of practical implications.

PRACTICAL AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Studies on Strategy Directors

Prior research on Strategy Directors is very limited and indeed for some authors they have been theorized out of existence (Cunningham et al. 2007). It was the Strategic Management Society conferences and its book series where research about Strategy Directors first appeared (Paroutis and Pettigrew, 2003, 2005). For their Harvard Business Review article Breene, Nunes and Shill (2007) surveyed 200 senior managers in the US who considered themselves as strategy officers. They collected media data on 100 of them and then carried out a series of interviews. These Chief Strategy Officers (CSOs) had a multiplicity of titles and diverse back grounds but the authors observed that despite these differences there were common aspects to the role. CSOs are involved in strategy formulation, strategy refinement and its implementation. In Mintzbergian terms, they straddle the classic divide in strategy, between formulation and implementation. This breadth of activity means CSOs need to be able to tackle a wide range of challenges such as consumer innovation, international expansion, mergers and acquisitions, communications, business process redesign - a range which most people in functional oriented careers have not experienced. They also need to be able to work with and influence a wide range of executives across the whole organization. This broad mix of skills and experience is rare and highly valued. Whilst CSOs are often involved in strategy formulation, their main efforts are directed at getting buy-in to the strategy, its refinement and implementation. A sizeable portion of respondents said they used direct authority to achieve their aims and a few influenced others through reflected authority – the implicit or explicit support of the CEO, although the authors remark that this probably severely underestimates the true extent of this influencing mechanism. This view of the CSO could be characterized as a powerful figure in its own right, acting behind the scenes to directly influence and organize managers in order to achieve strategic alignment. In this image, the CSO is a star player, with a strong track record of achievement and a CEO in-waiting.

A recent article by Dye (2008) published in the McKinsey Quarterly reports findings from a round table of senior strategy officers. Various titled senior vice presidents of strategy and investor relations; strategy and business development; strategy and execution, the round table identifies that these CSOs feel there are certain commonalities in the role. Firstly they all comment upon the centrality and importance of the CEO as chief strategist and recognize the

CSO's role is dependent upon the CEO for sign-off decisions. The critical role of the CEO means that the CSO needs to be able compliment their specific skills and tendencies and add value by being able to explore facts and alternatives around the various strategic choices which face them. Secondly CSOs have one foot in the corporate suite and the other deep in business units. Although there were differences in emphasis, with some strategies more head office driven and others where the strategy was driven by businesses, there was agreement that CSOs get feedback from businesses, overlay global trends and then prioritize opportunities. Thirdly balancing short and long term goals was perceived as an important challenge and some felt it the most important one. This would vary from emphases on expansion to restructuring depending upon the state of the market. Despite these pressures CSOs had to always maintain some sort of balance and perspective between long and short term issues.

Research by Cunningham et al. (2007) moves attention from the role of the senior strategist to their skills, motivations and backgrounds. Through the use of focus groups in an Irish software company, they identified four key skills for a strategist, namely 1) a structured and analytical mind; 2) an entrepreneurial ability – to think outside the box; 3) the ability to network and communicate effectively; 4) leadership – to provide direction and take decisions. These findings corroborate earlier work on strategizing capabilities (Paroutis and Pettigrew, 2005) and surface a paradoxical quality in Strategy Directors – that they may be analytical and creative at the same time and that there needs to be balance.

The Strategy-as-Practice Perspective

The intellectual location of this paper is within the new 'Strategy as Practice' perspective on strategic management (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Jarzabkowski et al. 2007; Johnson et al., 2003; Whittington, 2007). This perspective recognizes that the traditional approach of the strategy discipline has been to treat strategy as a property of organizations – something an organization has. This has ignored that strategy is also something that executives *do* (Hambrick, 2004; Jarzabkowski, 2004). In this way a long standing literature on the nature of managerial work (Mintzberg, 1973) is brought back into the strategy field. The strategy as practice views strategizing "as a socially accomplished, situated activity arising from the actions and interactions of multiple level actors" (Jarzabkowski, 2005: 6). Practice researchers try to uncover the detailed actions that constitute a strategy process (Brown and

Duguid, 2001; Johnson et al., 2003). Hence, the strategy as practice approach favors managerial agency, situated action, and strategy stability together with strategic change (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Wilson and Jarzabkowski, 2004) rather than focusing on a set of change events from a firm level of analysis, as most process studies tend to do. In addition to this anthropological orientation, where scholars are invited to dive deep into organizations to engage with executive's strategy activity in its intimate detail - sometimes described as 'micro-strategy' (Johnson et al., 2003), the Strategy as Practice perspective is also mindful of the aggregations of strategic activity into a bigger phenomenon. This micro and linkages approach has the potential to address a need in the strategy field that we still know little about the realities of strategic planning in practice (Whittington and Caillaet, 2008), what strategy managers actually do and how intra-organizational interactions could explain patterns of strategic activity (Grant, 2003).

Three concepts have been identified as central in the practice approach: *praxis*, *practices*, and *practitioners* (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Whittington, 2006). Praxis refers to the actual work of strategizing, all the meeting, consulting, writing, presenting, communicating and so on that are required in order to make and execute strategy. In other words "all the various activities involved in the deliberate formulation and implementation of strategy" (Whittington, 2006: 619). The concept of practices refers to "the shared routines of behavior, including traditions, norms and procedures for thinking, acting and using 'things', this last in the broadest sense" (ibid.: 619). Practitioners are the workers of strategizing, including managers, consultants and specialized internal change agents. For this study, our focal practitioners are the Strategy Directors and strategic stakeholders operating in large organizations. Our approach follows Orlikowski's (2002) study of the everyday activities of organizational members distributed across multiple units in a large software company during global product development. Hence, in our paper the praxis of Strategy Directors is operationalized as the wide set of activities in which they engage when they are involved in the strategy process. Activities are "the day to day stuff of management. It is what managers do and what they manage." (Johnson et al., 2003:15). Following this approach, this paper investigates the activities of Strategy Directors through the lenses of: *practitioners*, *practices* and *praxis* and contributes to our understanding of what Strategy Directors do during the strategy process. In researching these issues, our work is distinctive by concentrating not on middle level managers who have to periodically participate in the strategy process but instead on the directors and teams whose role is permanently about strategy and are located close to the Top Management Team. Following

from the discussion so far we address two central questions:

- *What are the specific roles and activities of Strategy Directors?*
- *What are the capabilities required by Strategy Directors during the strategy process?*

FIGURE 1: The Strategy-as-Practice Framework (Adapted from Whittington, 2006).



METHOD

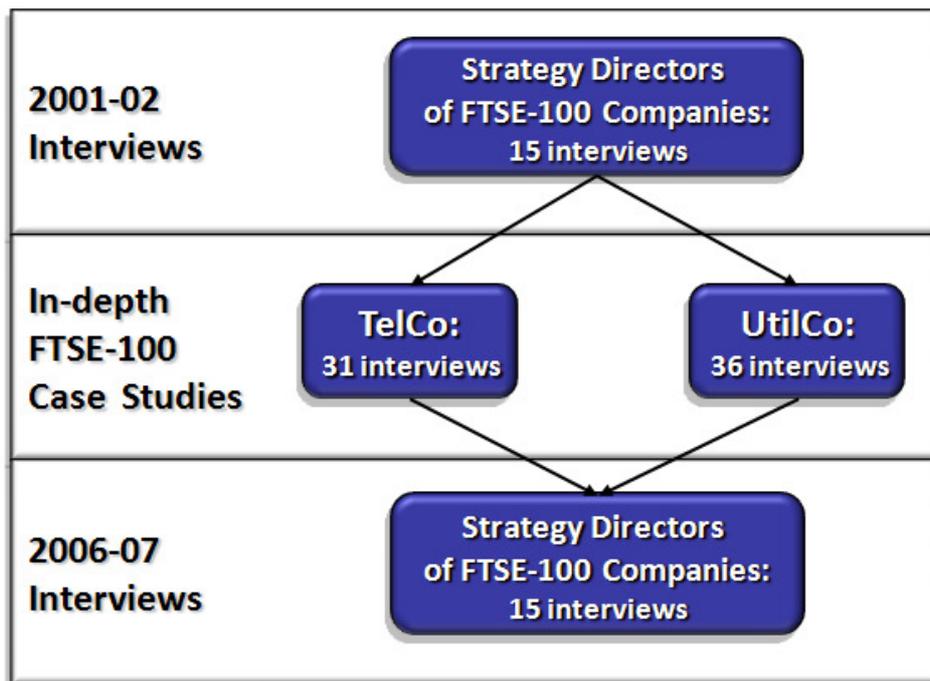
Case Selection and Data Collection

In order to achieve depth of insight into the nature of the practices in which Strategy Directors engage we employed qualitative research techniques. Our data consists of two sets of 15 interviews with Strategy Directors in FTSE-100 firms, across a number of industrial sectors, at two points in time (2002 and 2007) as well as in-depth longitudinal case studies of two FTSE-100 firms¹: UtilCo, a utility, and TelCo, a telecommunications firm. The initial set of 15 interviews was used to explore the roles and capabilities of Strategy Directors. The themes which emerged from the data provided an initial template for the subsequent in-depth longitudinal study of the two firm consisted of 67 interviews. In these two longitudinal case studies the informants were carefully chosen to include managers from the corporate centre and two major business units in each firm. These managers had strategy related roles (e.g.

¹ The actual names of these two companies, their business units, the informants and other material have been disguised to preserve the anonymity of individual managers.

strategy analyst) as well as non-strategy related roles (e.g. marketing director, finance director). Secondary data in the form of company reports, strategy documents and presentations was used to complement the interviews. Findings from the 2002 interviews and the two in-depth case studies were then compared against a newer set of interviews with Strategy Directors in FTSE 100 companies gathered in 2007² in order to assess the robustness of findings and to identify any areas where the passage of time may have affected such roles. This design has also enabled comparisons to be made over time on each of the key research questions of 1) the nature of their work (including formal roles, actual day to day activities, routines and procedures, tools and techniques used, views on how they make strategy ‘happen’), and 2) the social influences upon their roles and the strategy process (including who major influences are inside and outside the organisation, how these influences come to bear on the process, how credibility is established and maintained). Overall, we conducted a total of 97 interviews over time (see figure 2 below).

FIGURE 2: Our Research Design



Data Analysis

The data was analyzed in two stages. In the first, the data was analyzed using inductive

² The interview proforma was semi structured with about 17 questions. Each interview was conducted face to face (with one exception) and lasted on average one and a half hours. All interviews were taped and transcribed and this amounted to 740 pages of text.

qualitative techniques (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) informed by this study's focus on the activities of Strategy Directors during the strategy process while remaining alert to emerging ideas. These stages are similar to the ones used by Orlikowski (2002) for the study of the practice of members in a software company. Accordingly, the analysis consisted of multiple readings of the interview transcripts, and the archival data, and the identification of the activities of Strategy Directors and other strategy managers during the strategy process. The result of this analysis was a rich set of set of recurring themes corresponding to the activities undertaken by Strategy Directors during the strategy process in each firm. These themes were filtered according to the three lenses of praxis, practitioners and practices from the strategy-as-practice literature (refer to figure 1). The data was then analyzed once more, focusing on investigating the extent to which particular activities associated with the work of Strategy Directors could be grouped in broader sets of categories. Hence, the resulting categories of practice are an aggregate of activities undertaken by Strategy Directors during the strategy process. Measures were taken to ensure the reliability of this coding procedure. Accordingly, two coders -not related to this study- independently coded a subset of our transcripts and Cohen's kappa coefficient of consistency (Cohen, 1960) was calculated for the particular codes³. Overall, data triangulation, inter-coder reliability checks and validation from participants were utilized to limit the possibility of researcher bias.

FINDINGS

From our analysis, a unique insight into what Strategy Directors' regard as 'strategy' and 'strategic activity' has emerged together with rich data on their practices and routines. Their view of social forces acting upon the strategy process has also enabled a broader view of the role of Strategy Directors than is current in the literature. As noted in the previous section and in order to interpret and organize our findings we utilize the practitioners/praxis/ practices framework in what follows.

Practitioners – the Strategy Director

The focus of this paper is Strategy Directors at board level. There are a profusion of labels to

³ Cohen's kappa coefficient of consistency was chosen because it allows for two coders, it accounts for chance agreement between coders compared to percent agreement and is among the most commonly accepted rates in management research (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, Bracken, 2002).

describe them. For instance in this research the following were often encountered: Global Strategy Director, Head of Strategy, Global Business Development Director, Strategy and M&A Director, Strategic Planning Director. In one large multinational there were 40 strategy titles alone. A prior US study estimated over 90 job descriptors for strategy officers (Breene, Nunes, Shill, 2007). Despite this complexity of titles, UK Strategy Directors reported the actual labels as not very important and in practice the activities beneath the titles overlap very significantly. Indeed in discussing this point with Strategy Directors and how their titles came about it was often on an ad-hoc basis rather than any intention of deep resonance with the job. Another complexity was that Strategy Directors are located at different places on organizational charts.

These organizational charts show that a primary direct report is with the CEO – sometimes on its own and sometimes with another report. We identified three different types of Strategy Director in terms of their position on organizational charts. 1) The Strategy Director sitting on the main board in their own right is often a long serving executive of the organization with substantial previous line experience; 2) The Strategy Director reporting to a main Board Director and also working with the CEO is frequently a high powered management consultant brought into the business for their industry knowledge and superior analytical skills. This outside person may have been brought in at a more junior level in the strategy group and been promoted to this position⁴; 3) the Strategy Director who is not on the main board but is the right hand confidant of the CEO is frequently the ex senior partner of a major consulting firm who brings a rich external perspective to the business, or a senior industry figure from outside the firm.

These charts however do not tell the whole story. Characteristic of Strategy Directors is that they have more fluid positions than these figures can show. Whereas other divisional heads are atop of a vertical chain of command consisting of large numbers of direct reports, this is not the case with Strategy Directors who generally have very few direct reports. Their role is to liaise across these divisions as well as vertically within them. Their location is therefore difficult to represent in classical organizational chart form.

The extensive social linkages between Strategy Directors and all key executives in the firm is

⁴ Often companies place their smartest young executives in a strategy function but they are then rotated out back into line positions. It is unusual for them to remain and rise to board level in this way.

a distinguishing characteristic of these executives. They are embedded in very extensive social networks across multiple levels of the business as well as being in very close contact with the CEO. This high internal connectedness is critical for the Strategy Director to be able to perform the role of engaging across the firm in all issues with strategic impact.

Interestingly, although Strategy Directors did interact with external experts such as lawyers, accountants, investment bankers for specific projects such as an acquisition, their social networks were heavily oriented towards internal connectedness.

Praxis – the work of strategy

The role of Strategy Directors is nuanced in terms of the complexities mentioned above, but the similarities between them are more striking than the differences. In all cases Strategy Directors were engaged in a broad mix of strategy issues such as formulating strategies ‘de nuevo’; acting as a sounding board for strategies; translating strategies articulated by the CEO into practical implementable plans; communicating strategies to a broad range of stakeholders; aligning internal stakeholders to strategies; acting as a strategy broker for in-company interest groups; guiding and managing the implementation of strategies.

Whilst Strategy Directors sometimes came up with new strategies for the firm, it was more often the case that their primary role would be to work alongside the CEO in debating, refining and articulating strategy. Their role was generally one of an objective sounding board – an ‘organizational conscience’ which would remind top management of overall aims, objectives and balance. In the words of one Strategy Director, ‘*I am the Jiminy Cricket⁵ of the Organisation. I am forever saying what about balance, what about the long term*’?⁶

Otherwise Strategy Directors would generate a more limited set of strategic initiatives within a broad direction set from above. These initiatives however could embrace a bewildering array of activities causing most Strategy Directors to comment upon the huge span of the job. One described themselves as ‘*The Director of everything*’. It seemed that they need to be able to engage with a very broad set of issues and many remarked that ‘*The biggest challenge is breadth – a critical skill*’. Paradoxically maintaining the big picture, whilst also being able to bring about micro implementation, was also a major challenge. In the words of

⁵ Jiminy Cricket is a character in a Disney movie and depicts the conscience of the main character Pinocchio.

⁶ All interviewee comments have been anonymised to protect their identities

one Strategy Director, *'You need a helicopter perspective and mustn't get sucked into the day to day but the day of the egghead strategy director, removed from actual implementation, is long gone'*. *'The way in which a lot is achieved is not in a sort of ivory tower'*. Coping with these tensions of breadth and depth it is not surprising that the job comes with significant time pressure *'4 hours sleep in 72 hours! I can't even get to read the FT.'*

Strategy Directors are embedded in very extensive social networks of strategy stakeholders. Internally these included primarily the CEO, divisional heads, functional heads, strategy teams at head office, within divisional and within business units as well a numerous other senior executives who became relevant depending upon the strategic episode. The Strategy Director's primary role is to be i) close to the CEO, supporting their activities, and ii) to be highly embedded in the business across multiple levels. i) The closeness to the CEO is well illustrated by comments such as *'we are constantly popping in and out of each others offices'*. In several cases Strategy Director offices were located next to the CEO's office and most of them met with the CEO almost every day. ii) The importance of being highly embedded in the business is being aware of all strategy issues in the firm. This can only be achieved by being highly connected horizontally and vertically. In this way the Strategy Director is distinctive in working across silos of interests and connecting multiple stakeholders in fluid ways.

Externally, Strategy Directors did interact with experts such as lawyers, accountants, investment bankers, consultants for specific projects such as an acquisition or a restructuring but in all cases these links tended to be on a project by project basis. Although the Strategy Director was fully informed of the progress on strategic projects, they were not always the ones working most closely associated with these advisors. Overall Strategy Director's social networks were heavily oriented towards internal strategy practitioners rather than external ones.

Overall, we found Strategy Directors to be involved in a plethora of activities. They were performing a complicated role across multiple levels. At one hand, they are *executing*, *reflecting* and *initiating* strategy within the central strategy team they are directly supervising -here knowledge is generated amongst the members of the team and the interactions between them. At the other hand, they are also *coordinating*, *supporting* and *collaborating* with multiple strategy stakeholders -here the emphasis is on interactions between strategists

representing various organizational levels and the construction of knowledge during meetings, teleconferences, virtual teams and away days. Next we turn our attention on the capabilities required for such complicated role.

Capabilities – developing and disseminating the work of strategy

In all cases Strategy Directors had low positional power. None of them believed they had the power to tell any divisional or line manager what to do and none of them tried based on their own authority: *'I didn't have any positional power as it were over the divisional heads'*.

Although all of them said that they could call upon support from the CEO on a particular issue and they also resorted to reflected power on rare occasions, they felt this undermined their own credibility. They also stressed they often resorted to raising 'power barriers' between themselves and line managers and interfered with their ability to really be embedded in the business. *'Although they never forgot I saw the CEO every day and that I worked with the board and the CEO, this could be a barrier if I was perceived as the CEO's henchman'*. Divisional heads valued the Strategy Director's access to the CEO and Board and often used them as sounding boards for their presentations and initiatives, but only if some sort of trust had been established. In many cases executives sought out Strategy Director as the right place to advise on new ideas and initiatives and how these might be presented to the board. In some instances Strategy Directors would co-present these initiatives as they were able to communicate more effectively at this level than the originators of the ideas. This 'incubator role' or 'business angel' is a good example of a mechanism for connecting initiatives from the grass roots of the organisation to the very top.

In order to carry out their hugely demanding and varied job with low actual power and few real resources required high socio / political and technical skills. Being perceived as astute / wise - socially connected; technically smart; contextually sensitive, is critical for the credibility of a Strategy Director.. Inter-personal skills are vital and indeed were rated above analytical ones which were seen as hygiene factors. *'Those with very, very strong rational intellectual skills sometimes don't have the soft skills and contextual awareness that allows them to do the right things'*. *'I went in thinking I would do that role well through my brilliant strategic ideas. I came out realising how important the inter-personal side was.'*

Communicating across multiple vertical, horizontal and organisational levels with tact and

diplomacy was viewed as a critical skill. In vertical terms this meant being able to work at big picture and pragmatic levels – ‘*from 10,000 to 10 metres*’. Horizontally it meant being able to communicate effectively with different functional areas and for international operations, also be sensitive to national cultural differences; ‘*with Germans they will respond to a neat email but with Greeks you have to visit them*’. ‘*Strategy Directors have to be good listeners, translators and influencers*’. They have to be able ‘*to work every angle*’.

Critical capabilities for Strategy Directors were the ability to persuade, negotiate, influence and collaborate. As one put it ‘*You have to work through divisional heads*’. Persuasion had to be upwards, downwards as well as horizontally across the business. ‘*There are lots and lots of meetings and informal communications*’. An example of upward management ‘*to ease the decision making process for the CEO*’ is getting an approval related to an important marketing initiative. ‘*I translated the Chinese name we would use on our boxes for the CEO as ‘silk’. In Chinese it actually meant ‘fresh jasmine’ – he would have had a fit!*’ Explaining this action, the Strategy Director said that ‘*in the interests of moving forward, I didn’t want the CEO getting hung up on a detail*’. Other Strategy Directors have commented upon using their sifting and judgmental abilities to identify those things which are material and those which are not, so messages can be delivered with clarity. Strategy Directors are continuously ‘interpreting’ and ‘translating’ strategic impulses in multiple directions.

Concluding, Strategy Directors have to be adept at constructing and managing effective social networks of strategy practitioners. This means building multi-level alignment between different and often conflicting interest groups. One Strategy Director characterised this as being like ‘*the reins between husky dogs and sledge driver*’ where the top management team might be the sledge driver, the line managers the husky dogs and the Strategy Director working to transmit intentions and energy in several directions; absorbing and diffusing tensions whilst attempting to maintain directional coherence. More than the Janus paradox, where an executive is confronted with two opposing tensions, the Strategy Director has a ‘Polycephalus problem’ – of facing multiple tensions in space and time, where the biggest skill is to balance different temporal horizons and conflicting initiatives amongst a diverse set of strategic stakeholders.

Practices – uses of tools and techniques

Every Strategy Director said that they either used very basic models such as SWOT or didn't really use models or frameworks at all even though many of them were expert in strategy models and techniques. *'We don't really use models – even though I have written papers on the balanced score card. I hardly use this now – it tends to be the wise man approach to critiquing reports'*. *'You'll be shocked to hear that in a company of this size and complexity, which ought to have the latest in techniques and tools for analysis, we generally rely on the good old SWOT'*. *'I can't think of anything specific we might use'*. *'We strip back to the basics' – unpick the general.*

In terms of formal output, the Strategy Directors did create substantial numbers of reports for the Board and CEO – often at short notice *'there is always another power point presentation to prepare'*. In most cases companies were very particular about formats and style. One company for instance insisted on a story book of power point slides with only one text caption per slide, so that someone could read through all the slides rapidly with the headers forming a story line.

The general impression of practices for Strategy Directors is a large number of routine micro-processes such as the format for working up an initiative, the approach to presenting materials to the Board and investors, sitting on committees where there would be processes for decision making on investments. Overall however the day to day job is more remarkable for the lack of 'routines' than their presence. A number of Strategy Directors showed diaries where every day and every week was quite different. Strategic episodes could arise at any time in any area and require the application of substantially different skill sets. Committees on which Strategy Directors sat were often ephemeral, such as an integration team which would slowly dissolve as the area being integrated became part of the normal business. Despite variety being the characteristic of these jobs there was a much broader rhythm in the general annual strategy planning cycle and on a two or three strategic horizon basis. Interestingly not all Strategy Directors were heavily involved in the strategy planning cycle, some even choosing to avoid its detail. For these reasons the role is characterized more by variety than sameness on a day to day or week by week basis. Flexibility is also demanded in working closely *with CEOs* who are very varied in their personalities and demands. The Strategy Director role is to cope with huge variety and scope and to respond to and anticipate multiple internal and external pressures within and upon the firm. To embrace difference

requires an openness and flexibility - to be able to think and act differently, rather than follow routines.

CONCLUSION

This paper set out to examine who are Strategy Directors and what do they do. In particular it addressed the questions of what is the role of these strategists and what capabilities do they deploy. Through the use of a multi-level research approach involving many interviews with Board level Strategy Directors in the UK over time, and with other strategy practitioners, we revealed a unique set of insights into the role and capabilities of a central -but neglected by research- community of strategists in large firms. Key findings include the need for Strategy Directors to build alignment horizontally and vertically across multiple levels in an organization. As mentioned, they were likened to the reins connecting the driver of a sledge to the dog team – sensitively transmitting and responding to numerous strategic impulses in order for overall coherence in direction to be achieved. It is this role which the Strategy Director performs which enables organizations to be flexible, responsive and efficient. In order to perform this role, Strategy Directors require critical capabilities such as influencing, negotiating, planning and analytical skills. These we classified in broad terms as i) technical abilities; ii) interaction skills; iii) meta-level abilities. It is the skilful deployment of these capabilities which enables the Strategy Director to mediate day-to-day strategizing practices in order to enable organizational change and continuity.

Our findings can have implications for recruiters of Strategy Directors as well as those who purport to create them, namely business schools. Recruiting firms and recruitment consultants should be mindful that pure analytical skills or industry knowledge alone, no matter how impressive, are unlikely to be sufficient for a Strategy Director to be really effective. A number of participants in our research commented upon how they had started out with this view and then realised they had to change in order to get the job done. In terms of creating appropriate candidates for the role of Strategy Director, business schools tend to teach strategy as an analytical subject which pays scant regard to influencing and political skills which are vital for the role. We are already utilizing insights from our research across a number of MBA and executive classroom settings as means of discussing the realities of strategizing in a variety of organizations. One way in which this can be done is by bringing the practitioner back into the lecture theatre to explain how things get done in strategy.

However, we feel that there is a lot more work that we, as management educators collectively, need to do to inform our participants on what means to become and be an effective strategist. In other words, for business schools to produce executives who are likely to succeed as Strategy Directors, strategy courses need to evolve to incorporate these missing elements, so that the candidates produced are 'wise' enough for the job.

The Strategy Director fulfils a vital and largely unsung role within large organizations. They reside amongst the most profound tensions within an organization attempting to hold everything together as it flexes to accommodate internal and external pressures. In connecting strategy stakeholders over time the Strategy Director can be regarded as a micro-kosmos of the complex strategizing which takes place in large firms and for researchers may be proxies for understanding larger / macro level ways of strategizing.

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